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Policy Futures in Education
Volume 11 Number 5 2013
www.wwwords.co.uk/PFIE

Policy Futures in Education

Working the 'Shady Spaces': resisting neoliberal hegemony in New Zealand education

CHRISTOPHER McMASTER
School of Educational Studies and Human Development, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand

ABSTRACT While the chill winds of neoliberalism blow, it seems some cultures are better equipped to weather the storm. The London fog raincoat or the American Levi's denim jacket has left little insulation against the effects of a quarter century of so-called 'reforms'. New Zealand's Swanndri bush shirt, though not as efficient as the Finnish Arctic parka, has provided surprising insulation against the policies heralded as 'the New Zealand experiment'. This article explores the nature of neoliberalism and its relation to education policy, and considers the inherent inhibitors, or *intuitive cultural resistors*, to neoliberalism within New Zealand culture. It argues that rather than focus solely on the negative impacts of neoliberal reform on New Zealand education – a valuable and critical tool for our understanding – research should also focus on those aspects of New Zealand culture, Maori and Pakeha, which blunt the excesses of neoliberalism that can be seen in such places as the USA and England. These areas can provide the 'shady spaces' in which to combat neoliberal hegemony.

Introduction: neoliberalism, or 'there is no alternative'

For the past quarter of a century, the dominant political and economic ideology has been referred to as neoliberal capitalism, or neoliberalism. In New Zealand, the fourth Labour government (1984-1990) ushered in reforms that were ostensibly attempting to deal with the perceived 'crisis of the welfare state' (Peters & Marshall, 1996). The public sector, it was claimed, was overloaded. The massive fiscal deficit and heavy overseas borrowing, increasing disparity in income distribution, dependence on fluctuating commodity prices and mounting economic difficulties exemplified New Zealand as 'a classic example of "riches to rags"' (Openshaw, 2009, p. 44). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development reported that the country had an economy that was 'cost-plus' and uncompetitive (Kelsey, 1997, p. 5). Labour, traditionally a party championing social democracy, followed the 'Washington consensus' in liberalising the economy. This radical departure from the social contract of the past attracted world attention, and New Zealand was seen as a test case, or experiment, for New Right policies (Kelsey, 1997).

During this period of transformation, other Western nations, to greater or lesser degrees depending on their political and cultural environments, were following similar paths. In the USA, a dubious theory of 'trickle down' gave a populist bent to the so-called 'Reaganomics' of the administration of President Ronald Reagan. In the United Kingdom, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher insisted that there was no alternative to her Conservative government policies. Similarly, in Canada, monetarist policies were embraced that equated to a limiting of public spending. In Australia, the then federal Treasurer, Paul Keating, 'floated' the Australian dollar, thus beginning a process of lessoning governmental control over the economy. Behind these reforms was a belief about the nature of the state itself, as well as a specific interpretation of individualism. It is better known in today's language as 'corporate globalisation'.

 http://dx.doi.org/10.2304/pfie.2013.11.5.523

In essence, the adherents of neoliberal economic policies believed that the state should reduce its role in society. Giroux (2008, p. 9), pointing to the cultural and ideological features in his definition, characterised neoliberalism as 'a broad based rhetorical and cultural movement designed to obliterate public concerns and liquidate the welfare state'. It was the market, and not the state, that was best equipped to meet society's needs. Through competition, that guiding neoliberal virtue, the market will sort out the efficient from the inefficient, the weak from the strong, and the winners from the losers. It will allocate all resources – whether physical, natural, human or financial – with the greatest possible efficiency (George, 1999). This was to be achieved largely through privatising public resources – today euphemistically called 'asset sales' – as part of downsizing the public sector. Privatisation resulted in the selling of public services built up after years of public effort and public expenditure in the belief that, under private ownership, those services would become more efficient. Another feature of neoliberal policy involved the deregulation of business and finance so that the entrepreneur (read 'large corporate interests') would have more freedom to invest (and profit) in the economy. Furthermore, free trade was to be the order of the day, with reduced restrictions on the movement of capital and goods (though not labour), including any tariffs erected to protect domestic industries, as well as labour or environmental laws that may be seen to impede investment.

Neoliberalism radically alters the social contract, redefining the role of the state from a commitment to the social good to one of managing global movements of capital (Giroux, 2008). Rhetorically, it is not the state's business to interfere with the individual's freedom to excel and succeed, or alternatively fail. The individual is to be *free from social constraints or responsibilities to the community*. Hand in hand with the assault on the public sector is the individualisation of society. As the government reduces its responsibility for the public good (health, housing, education, jobs), individuals are made responsible for their own successes or failures. As Bauman writes:

> If they fall ill, it is because they were not resolute and industrious enough in following the health regime. If they stay unemployed, it is because they did not try hard enough to learn the skills of winning an interview or because they did not try hard enough to find a job or because they are, purely and simply, work-shy. (Bauman, 2001, p. 47)

Similarly, if they (the more obvious beneficiaries of a neoliberal system) are awarded a multimillion-dollar bonus, it is because they deserve it. The point under neoliberal ideology is that it is not structural or systemic deficits that produce inequalities, but *individual* strengths or weaknesses. Power is disconnected from responsibility. It is a social and moral Darwinism that normalises and pathologises inequality (Giroux, 2011).

The Italian Antonio Gramsci's conception of hegemony might accurately describe the power of neoliberalism in today's world. 'Hegemony' referred to a condition in which all aspects of social reality are dominated by or supportive of dominant groups (Mayo, 1999, p. 35). As Susan George points out:

> No matter how many disasters of all kinds the neo-liberal system has visibly created, no matter what financial crises it may engender, no matter how many losers and outcasts it may create, it is still made to seem inevitable, like an act of God, the only possible economic and social order available to us. (George, 1999)

Neoliberalism is both an economic theory and a cultural politics. While wealth continues to be squeezed upward (a reverse process to the promised 'trickle down') and social inequality increases (Stiglitz, 2012), neoliberal ideology remains the dominant discourse of our day. Balancing the budget has become the primary focus of governments – the vision remains economic rather than social, and we are confronted with a future that holds nothing beyond a watered-down version of the present (Giroux, 2008). Neoliberalism is the new 'common sense'. It is, as Jameson (1994) observes, easier to imagine the destruction of the earth and of nature than the end of capitalism.

'The New Zealand Experiment'

The radical programme implemented in New Zealand beginning in 1984 mirrored, in many ways, the structural adjustment programmes that developing nations undertook in order to secure loans from international financial institutions. In New Zealand, it was undertaken *voluntarily* by a

democratically elected government (Kelsey, 1997). The reforms affected all sectors of New Zealand society. While New Right economic theorists of the international community lauded the programme, social critics pointed out that unemployment and poverty had consequently become structural features of New Zealand life (Kelsey, 1997, p. 10). Regardless, the reforms have been institutionalised by successive governments – Labour and National – over the following years. The success of 'the experiment' is questionable, as

> there is considerable evidence being amassed that the working and middle classes have faced a decline in their standard of living, their situation in the labour market is more precarious, and access to state provision such as education, health, housing and other welfare services, has become more tenuous. (Robertson & Dale, 2002, p. 464)

It does not alter the fact, however, that neoliberal principles continue to shape fiscal, social and, in particular, education policy in New Zealand today.

Reform of the education system in New Zealand came with the introduction of *Tomorrow's Schools* in 1988 (Lange, 1988). This followed the 1987 Picot task force report, *Administering for Excellence* (Picot & Taskforce to Review Education Administration, 1988), which recommended not just sweeping changes, but a whole new structure. The extent to which the Treasury influenced or even dictated both the task force and later legislation has never been resolved (Peters & Marshall, 1996; Openshaw, 2009). The changes certainly fit into the neoliberal programme of the 1980s: the field of education was seen as a market like any other public service, which, if opened to competition, would improve the quality of the 'product' as well as student achievement. The public school was seen as a monopoly, with a captive clientele and hence no impetus to improve. With the running of schools more devolved to the local communities (through the establishment of boards of trustees including parental and community representatives), the local school would reflect the desires of that local community. Parents, given the opportunity to shop round for the school of their choice (through the relaxing of zoning rules), would spur each school to excel in its attempts to attract students to its establishment. Funding for private schools was increased, ostensibly to increase consumer choice. As the market is the best arbiter of social need, according to neoliberal thinking, the market will help create a world-class education system. The belief was that the invisible hand of the market would lead to better schools (Apple, 2007).

The reforms certainly fit the neoliberal agenda pursued elsewhere. Specific ideas embedded in the new thinking reflected the values of the reforms of *Tomorrow's Schools*: managerialism, privatisation, accountability, standards, competition, choice – all the keywords were there and applied to some degree. What is worth focusing on is the degree to which certain aspects of that neoliberal agenda were not fully applied, as well as considering the reasons why they were not. The reforms ushered in by *Tomorrow's Schools* could be seen, through a neoliberal lens, as an incomplete project. It included within it many social democratic themes as well as market managerial ideologies (Thrupp & Irwin, 2010). For example, more parental involvement and decentralisation could be seen to reflect the social democratic aim of increased local decision making (Court & O'Neill, 2011). And even when more overt policies have been implemented – such as the abolishment of enrolment zones under the 1991 Education Amendment Act – these extremes have been amended following demonstrable evidence of their negative effect (Ladd & Fiske, 2003). Even the role of the agency created to measure accountability – the Education Review Office – was tempered in its auditing mandate to 'assesses and assist' subject schools (Thrupp & Irwin, 2010). Are there aspects of New Zealand culture – 'shady spaces' in a globalised world – which *inhibit* the extremes of neoliberalism? Are there *intuitive cultural resistors* that act to limit or slow the neoliberal project? If there are, then they are certainly worthy of further exploration and exploitation.

Neoliberalism Unbridled

The neoliberal agenda is so advanced in some nations, particularly the USA – that land of New Zealand's future, as Nash (2007) warns – that standardised testing in some states is being used to measure not just student ability, but also teacher effectiveness. Additionally, as funding for each school is pegged to attaining standards, so too is teachers' pay. Right-wing lobby groups vociferously oppose teachers having any role in the setting of state standards, and legislators

propose the inspection of teachers' classroom practice every three years. These are envisioned to be somewhat similar to whole-school inspections, where a team of reviewers focuses on an entire school, only these teams will focus entirely on individual teacher performance. Rather than focusing on pedagogic techniques, teachers are reduced to fighting for their collective ability to discuss evaluative systems (Sanders, 2012). This attack on collective bargaining can be seen as part of the weakening of the autonomy and authority of teachers. Through a narrow curriculum and the mandating of high-stakes standardised testing (which is used as an ultimate measure), the teacher is reduced to a technician, teaching from prescribed textbooks and preparing each class to jump through the appropriate hoop. The space for critical thinking, a critical pedagogy or a place where students should be educated for citizenship has become dangerously limited.

The privatisation of education in the USA continues apace under the imperatives of 'choice' and 'competition', with over 5600 charter schools enrolling an estimated 2 million students (Grisham, 2011). Charter schools are publically funded schools that operate independently of the school district in which they are situated. Charter initiatives (the first charter school is scheduled to open in New Zealand in 2014) allow existing schools to remove themselves from the public system (but retain public funding) or for entrepreneurs, parents or even teachers to create their own schools. Despite the rapid spread of this phenomenon, charter schools have failed to demonstrate any significant advantage over the public system, with large dropout rates and fewer than 17% of charter schools outperforming schools in the public sector (Giroux, 2012). And an important question to ask regarding this phase of privatising education is: Who is benefitting financially? In the USA, banks and equity funds are given tax credits when they invest in charter schools, and they can piggyback those credits on other kinds of tax credits as they collect on the rents and debt services paid to them by the (publically funded) charter schools (*New York Daily News* columnist Juan Gonzales, cited in Giroux, 2012, p. 58).

The closure of public schools is celebrated as the market's just punishment for 'underperformance' – that is, performance measured by externally mandated attainment targets. The socio-economic nature of the school community is not a factor in this 'success' or 'failure'. Charter schools, in the USA as well as England, have attracted parents who live and work in relatively affluent areas, creating what has been referred to as 'white flight' (Apple, 2007). Schools in poorer communities find themselves in a 'spiral of decline' (Watson et al, 2003), and stratification according to social class is increased (Hatcher, 2006; Gordon & Morton, 2008). In the English media, this is celebrated as a boon for the property market, as houses will become more attractive to up-and-coming young parents as they seek their children's enrolment in one of the more than 160 'free schools' (England's version of the US charter school) opening throughout 2013 (Phibbs, 2012). That this news was read in the 'Homes and Property' section of the newspaper highlights how ingrained market values are in that nation's culture.

Neoliberalism in New Zealand Education

Indeed, culture becomes the arena where values, of the market or of social justice, are extended and disseminated. Neoliberalism is a historical and political construct (Giroux, 2008), and the extent to which it becomes the 'common-sense' way of interpreting life and understanding the world will vary from culture to culture. It has been the dominant discourse in New Zealand for the last quarter of a century, and the effects of that ideology have been well researched. After 25 years, competition and choice have not raised standards, nor improved teaching (Ladd & Fiske, 2003). They have resulted in reduced job satisfaction and a deprofessionalisation of teachers (Alison, 2006). Competition and choice have been shown to punish poorer communities. 'When market policies are introduced into a context that is already highly stratified according to social class and ethnicity', Watson et al (2003, p. 18) conclude, 'it is no surprise that schools serving the poorest communities in New Zealand are defined as the "losers"'. Robertson and Dale (2002) note how markets in education tend to reproduce social polarisation, as those with the most problems have the fewest resources to deal with them – the opposite effect promised by market proponents. Conversely, neoliberal policies have come to be seen as a 'middle-class capture' of the education system (Peters & Marshall, 1996), as that socio-economic sector has been best able to exploit 'choice' policies.

Moreover, as education is connected increasingly to the market, the focus of blame has shifted from structural deficiencies or systematic inequalities to the individual. The focus on national standards and test scores can be seen as a diversion away from any consideration or analysis of social inequalities, and the Education Review Office admits no association between social class and educational attainment (Nash, 2007). The sole responsibility lies with the individual school, the individual teacher and the individual student.

Important contradictions emerge within neoliberal reforms in that, in the desire to reduce the role of the state and to withdraw from society, so many problems are created (for example, in the failure of 'trickle-down' wealth to emerge and the predictable increase in inequality) that the state must intervene to address the resultant social problems (Robertson & Dale, 2002). This cannot, however, be done by addressing root causes, as that would betray the ideology of neoliberalism, so real solutions are never achieved. Drug testing beneficiaries will never solve the problem of endemic unemployment, just as criticising teachers' pronunciation of names will not address the underperformance of 20% of New Zealand (primarily Maori, Pacifica and poor) schoolchildren. While decentralising some aspects of decision making and funding, central mechanisms are put in place to 'steer from a distance' (Court & O'Neill, 2011), as local schools must implement policies, such as national standards, and undergo auditing and inspections, through mechanisms such as the Education Review Office. The more a system is decentralised, the more it is deemed necessary to have centralised auditing and accounting (Openshaw, 2009). The centre makes policy, curriculum and standards; the local ensures that they are implemented.

Maybe Not as Far as Other Countries

Equally important to studying the mechanics of the education system created by *Tomorrow's Schools*, as well as the ramifications of those policies, is a consideration of those areas where neoliberal reforms have met resistance and have seemingly been limited. Despite adopting a 'blank-page' approach to reforms, the Picot task force could not omit social democratic impulses, which are a part of New Zealand culture. Research has been lacking in examining these *intuitive cultural resistors* which act to inhibit neoliberalism. In the nation that, as Gordon and Whitty (1997, pp. 453-454) wrote in the late 1990s, 'has probably moved further towards the implementation of neoliberal approaches to the marketisation of public education systems than most other countries', the *extremes* of neoliberal policies seen at the present time in the USA and elsewhere in the anglophone world have not manifested themselves in New Zealand. These *intuitive cultural resistors* provide the 'shady spaces' where neoliberal hegemony can be challenged. If, as Giroux (2008) insists, culture is the battleground, then an assessment and celebration of those aspects of New Zealand culture – Maori and Pakeha – that refute a market ideology is well overdue.

The typical framework of neoliberal reforms has involved a pattern that has evolved largely as thus: centralised decision making on what is to be learned and taught, presented through increasingly prescriptive curricula; the outlining of 'national standards' (what should be known – decided from on high – and when/at what age); the need to measure attainment of national standards; the introduction and ratcheting up of national/high-stakes testing; the ranking of schools according to results; funding to schools and pay to teachers linked to the attainment of national standards; and incentives to private industry to fully enter the education 'market' (for example, charter schools – that is, publically funded private education) as public education is so obviously failing. The next step along this continuum is continued research demonstrating that the above 'reforms' do very little, if anything at all, to raise standards or achievement. Essentially, the purpose of education is changed from the pursuit of knowledge to the enhancement of private or individual gain, and schools are seen less as a public good than a private right.

Even if superficially comparing New Zealand to other Western states following neoliberal agendas, it becomes clear that New Zealand is no longer further along 'than most other countries' in their introduction. In the area of high-stakes testing, there is no New Zealand comparison to the proposed English baccalaureate certificate (EBacc) that it was intended to introduce in 2015 (Higgins, 2012). That end-of-year test for 16-year-olds denies any outside factors the examination board assigned to each subject and will ignore the socio-economic reality of students and the location of the school. All is equal in the eyes of the assessors. There will be no resits, no teacher or

school input into assessment, no modular credit. The Minister for Education has since scrapped the controversial plan. In New Zealand, the modular-based National Certificate in Educational Achievement (NCEA) makes such a 'reform' impossible. The NCEA has, since 2004, been the main secondary school qualification for students of the New Zealand public education system. Assessment is both school-based and external. It has been widely praised due to its criteria-based assessment (opposed to standardised norms) and flexibility (Openshaw, 2009).

The NCEA has become a bulwark against such EBacc-style high-stakes testing. Similarly, national standards, which apply to Years 1 through 8, can be seen as a massive climbdown by the National government that imposed them. Although the neoliberal pattern of standards followed by testing is still threatened, as evidenced by news stories relating to teacher failure to assess student achievement by the new standards and, by implication, inferring that standardised testing is necessary (Blackhouse, 2012), the National Party has removed from its manifesto any call for national testing – a feature of several previous party platforms. The publication of results in a sort of 'league table', while accepted as normal practice in England, is seen as highly controversial and even damaging in New Zealand (Johnston, 2012).

While the Parent Advisory Council, introduced as part of localising decision making and the running of schools, has been disbanded, boards of trustees continue to be an entrenched feature of school governance. Often the site of tense conflict in the early days of *Tomorrow's Schools*, especially around the notion of 'bulk funding', the board of trustees has been seen as a powerful ally in defending community interests. Although not always successful, such as with the Northland School closure carried out under the last Labour government (Perrott, 2012), the small school becomes a hub which the whole community can rally to support. Any proposed class-size increase (the ratio of students to teacher) would be to the detriment of small (especially rural) schools, and yet the National government of John Key performed an about-turn when confronted by widespread community opposition. Minister of Education Hekia Parata's argument that 'quality teaching' is more important than class size was not enough to convert parents to her neoliberal values. In the case of the Christchurch rebuild and ministry plans to close or merge schools, community values again challenge arguments based on economic rationalisation.

Bulk funding, an originally contentious issue (Clark, 2010), has apparently disappeared from the public education agenda. Bulk funding to schools would have left the setting of teachers' salaries up to individual schools. While the increased autonomy in the education reforms of 1989 was largely welcomed by principals and boards of trustees, few were enthusiastic about extending this to the bulk funding of teachers' salaries (Sullivan, 2000). Under the new rules of the Education Amendment Bill 2012, proposed charter schools in New Zealand will be given the power to set their own teacher pay scales (Shuttleworth, 2012). Such teacher pay arrangements are the reality in the USA, where individual school districts negotiate with teacher unions, resulting in pay disparities not only between states, but within them. Governor Scott Walker of the state of Wisconsin is even attempting to pass legislation which removes collective bargaining (Giroux, 2012). And reducing public education to a private 'voucher'-based system (largely implemented by the fascist junta led by Augusto Pinochet in Chile during the 1980s) remains a non-starter in New Zealand. It is difficult to imagine how a voucher system, such as the free 20-hour scheme offered to parents and caregivers of preschoolers to choose an early years provider (Ministry of Education, 2012), can be adapted to the primary, intermediate or high school setting (Fiske & Ladd, 2003).

The New Zealand Curriculum of 2007 has been recognised as a product of the mix of social democratic cultural impulses with the neoliberal focus of government policy (Benade, 2011). Because of this contradiction, 'it opens space to integrate values content into critical pedagogy' (Benade, 2011, p. 160). Values hold a prominent and underpinning role in the curriculum, encouraging reflection coupled with critical thinking (Ministry of Education, 2007). The curriculum acknowledges the widespread support of values in New Zealand society, such as equity, diversity, sustainability, community participation, inclusion, integrity, and respect of self and others (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 10). The curriculum acknowledges not only that values reflect deeply held beliefs and assumptions, but also that they *should* be integrated into the life of the school. To Benade (2011, p. 160), this translates as encouragement towards critically reflecting on *whose* values and *which* values are core to a school's culture before those values are 'encouraged, modelled and explored', as the curriculum document advises. This critical reflection on values is very similar to whole-school review tools such as the *Index for Inclusion* (Booth & Ainscow, 2011). To the authors

of the *Index*, values and curricula are closely linked: values prompt thinking about the nature of the curriculum, they guide the actions we take, they 'spur us forward, give us a sense of direction and define a destination' (Booth & Ainscow, 2011, p. 21).

Discussion: working the 'shady spaces'

While the effects of neoliberal reforms continue to manifest in societies and education systems, certain cultures appear to have better insulation to protect themselves against the extremes of the ideology. One well-known example of this is Finland, where *intuitive cultural resistors*, such as values of social justice, have strongly deflected extremes of neoliberal reforms that have severely impacted other nations' systems. In terms of its education system, Finland has consistently demonstrated high standards (even on Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development measurements like the Programme for International Student Assessment). In contrast to neoliberal educational models, in Finland there are no private schools; educational administrators are required to have been teachers; there is no standardised testing except a matriculation examination at the end of school; there is trust in teachers to choose their own methods and materials; and teaching is seen as a respected profession. 'In my country', notes Pasi Sahlberg of the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, 'we are in education because we believe in cooperation and sharing. Cooperation is a core starting point for growth' (quoted in Barseghian, 2012). The extent to which those can be built into existing systems is indicative of the strength of cultural values. Whereas, for example, practitioners in Finland may perceive that the education policies there may be unsupportive of inclusive education, those policies do not impose significant barriers to inclusive innovation where it may occur (Tarr et al, 2011, p. 701). Finnish values – such as those that emphasise cooperation over competition – have enabled the Finns to build a world-class education system that refuses to reduce education to a market (Sahlberg, 2011).

Similarly, there appears to be aspects of New Zealand culture that offer resistance to neoliberal hegemony – that blunt extremes and challenge an orthodoxy which insists on the primacy of the market as the ultimate arbiter in human relations. It may lie in a sense of 'fair go' or a strong belief in equity, or perhaps what Belich (1996, p. 332) refers to as a 'colonial populism' that abhors 'small and shadowy conspiracies' – an egalitarianism and dislike of overt class distinctions. A small population keeps politics at a face-to-face level. Local campaigners can still influence the decision-making process. Local schools have the room to manoeuvre, to explore values and create cultures that encourage the value of caring over selfish competition. It may equally lie in a respect for *whanau* and community, the 'cultural potentialities', to borrow Royal's (2012) term, inherent in Maoridom. Tangata Whenua possess strength in epistemology and educational activism, as the *kura* movement so clearly demonstrates. The biculturalism of Aotearoa, respected (and mandated) by Te Tiriti, provides a ready avenue for collaboration, partnership and alliance.

Gramsci contended that: 'history presents possibilities, not constraints, and, since outcomes are up for grabs, it is up to humans to fight for the future at every level, especially the cultural level' (Borg et al, 2002, p. 116). His advice was to seek out those 'shady places' in which neoliberalism in education can be challenged. Turning our gaze to those inbuilt inhibitors, those values and features of New Zealand culture, can highlight sites of resistance as well as sites for celebration, where agency is exercised. Booth reminds us that:

> Values are fundamental guides and prompts to action. They spur us forward, give us a sense of direction and define a destiny. We cannot know that we are doing, or have done, the right thing without understanding the relationship between our actions and our values. For all actions affecting others are underpinned by values. Every such action becomes a moral argument whether or not we are aware of it. It is a way of saying 'this is the right thing to do'. (Booth, 2011, p. 33)

Creating a tomorrow that reflects New Zealand values should be a reflective and collective venture, not one hijacked by neoliberal ideologues. The 'shady spaces', the sites of resistance, our *intuitive cultural resistors* offer a firm starting place.

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CHRISTOPHER McMASTER is a doctoral candidate in the School of Educational Studies and Leadership at the University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand. His area of study is the re-culturing of school communities to reflect inclusive values and practices. *Correspondence*: chris.mcmaster@pg.canterbury.ac.nz